WILLIAM PAUL WHITSETT
A Biographical Sketch

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W.P. Whitsett in the prime of a long and useful life.

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Department of History
California State University
Northridge

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William Paul Whitsett

During W.P. Whitsett's long life he built and developed in the fields of mining, irrigation, and real estate. To each he brought enduring energy, faith, optimism, and impressive competence. Versatility was one of his greatest assets, and he made the most of the opportunities that excellence in many callings offered. His exciting era and area was southern California early in this century. In a practical sense the region flourished in a post-frontier period of grand designs and gigantic risks. To it Whitsett offered his own pioneer spirit and fresh methods to foster progress.

Appropriately, Whitsett was born on December 27, 1875 at Whitsett, Pennsylvania into a family which had pioneered in coal mining and coke production in the Pennsylvania hills. His father was Ralph C. Whitsett, a doctor. His mother, Emma Ross Whitsett, was descended from Betsy Ross. They were of English, Irish, and Scottish ancestry.[1]

Pleasant indeed were Paul's formative years. He enjoyed riding horses, fishing, hunting, and swimming. Unfortunately, his father contracted tuberculosis, then America's greatest killer, whose cause was just being fathomed. Ralph Whitsett went to Colorado for recovery while his wife ran the farm and reared the young children. In time, Ralph returned home, but he had not been cured. In the following months, he, Emma, and their two daughters died of "consumption." Fortunately, this was a close family, so Paul's grandparents took care of the children who survived. The grandparents were great readers and read aloud to their grandchildren from the Bible, Shakespeare, Dickens, Thackeray, and other classics.[2] Summers the boy worked on the family farm, and later he had a job in the Whitsett company store. The family was deeply religious, as Whitsett would always be, and they hoped he might become a minister, but Paul preferred the business world. For a short time he worked in the family coal mine, sometimes for three nights plus six days a week to earn extra money to attend college, Southwest State Normal School at California, Pennsylvania. The resourceful youth also sold Bibles to help pay his way. As a college student he invented and marketed a trousers stretcher which sold well. These selling experiences before the public helped him overcome shyness. Most of all young Whitsett enjoyed being his own boss. Even that early he impressed people with his sense of timing, ability to predict future trends, and an eagerness to act on these talents.[3]

After his graduation with a degree in business administration, Whitsett's career plans rapidly developed. He completed a commercial course at Farmington College in Ohio and became a coal operator at East Jellico Coal Company in Kentucky. At first he sold coal for railroad engineers. Later, in Chicago, Whitsett developed skills as a coal

entrepreneur. Times appeared poor for such a decision, for in 1896 the nation had not fully recovered from the Panic of 1893. In America's second city Paul and his brother Ralph founded the R.B. Whitsett Coal Company. He took coal off a shipper's hands and sought buyers. Luck beckoned in the form of an Illinois coal strike. Whitsett bought the product in Kentucky and got draft horses from Indiana to haul the much desired product for his desperate but fortunate customers.[4]

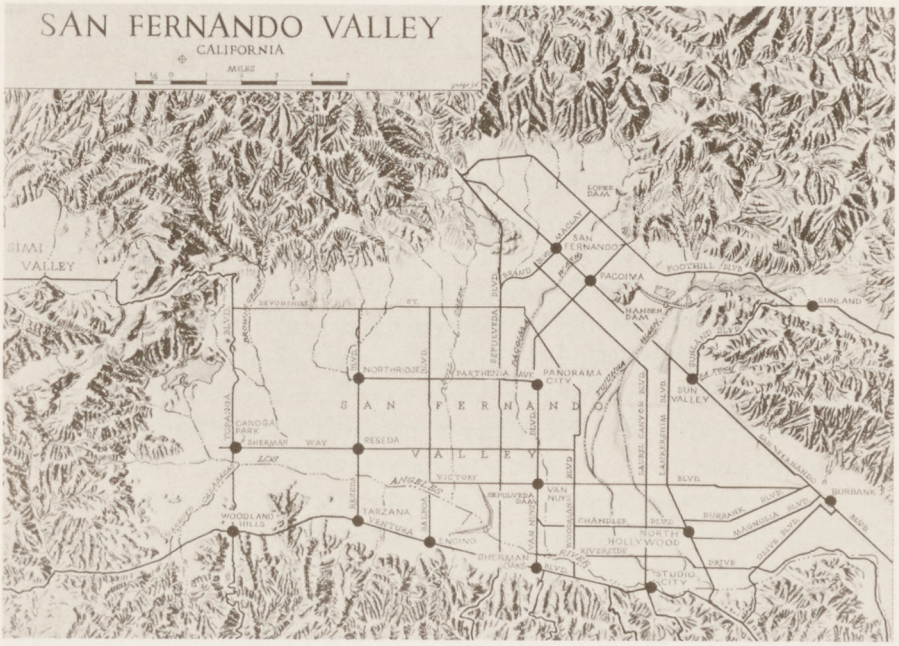
It was while Whitsett worked in Chicago that he met and married a Pennsylvania socialite, Sarah Haddock, on June 14, 1899. They would have three children, Frank, Paul Jr. and a daughter, Katherine, later Mrs. Wilton Still.[5]

Despite crises of labor and supply, which he ably handled, the next few years saw Whitsett's coal business in Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and Indiana clearly prospering. He had expanded advertising and had hired several salesmen to increase his customers. Whitsett conceived of the ingenious stratagem of supplying a coal scuttle to every housewife who bought from him. From there he developed a mail order coal business.[6]

Still a young man in his late twenties who seemed a dynamo of strength, Whitsett paid heavily for overworking. Like his parents and sisters before him, he contracted tuberculosis and had to retreat to a high, dry and sunny climate. Ironically, just as his father had, he was forced to leave his young wife and children in the east when he went west. Tuberculosis was a disease of the young and often proved fatal. Indeed, his life was taking a serious turn, but again his luck held, for in the Southwest his greatest days and sixty more wonderful years were ahead.

First, the invalid went to Sunmont, a tent city for sufferers near Santa Fe, New Mexico. Conditions there were primitive. Each tent had a floor and boarded walls, and a stove to keep patients warm at 7,000 feet elevation. Most of the sanitaria throughout this post-frontier Southwest were depressing places, with their rows of cadaverous men and women whom Westerners had long called "lungers" and "coughing pilgrims." Usually their hopes were high, but survival often pathetically brief. W.P. Whitsett had never known real despair, and the medical odds did not conquer him now. He decided to "think healthfully," as he later recalled. Always in love with the outdoors and particularly with this spectacularly beautiful scenery in the southern Rockies, he took up riding again and began to improve; he even gambled at roulette in Santa Fe! Next, Whitsett migrated to El Paso where the altitude was lower, and, he believed, better for him. In the nearby high plains he hunted antelope and turkey while he continued to improve. Meanwhile, he had sold out his Indiana coal mines for $135,000, and after paying debts had $30,000 left for investment.[7]

At thirty, in 1905, Whitsett made the most important move of his



life. His wife's grandfather, Charles G. Haddock, a Chicago banker, had moved to Los Angeles, California some years earlier and become a volunteer booster for its climate and opportunities. Ever since the railroad had arrived in the 1870s, Los Angeles had been a "sanitarium," its fine weather, agricultural fertility, and natural beauties vaunted by eastern and western advertisers. From San Diego to Santa Barbara southern California had benefited from praise based on a mixture of solid facts and half-truths in the first great era of its growth, the Boom of the Eighties, 1885-88. With the influx of thousands of health seekers, land investors, retirees, and tourists, Los Angeles city doubled every decade, and by 1900 its population had reached 102,000. Southern California had become an exciting place for a young, able, and ambitious man to work. The construction of a great world harbor at San Pedro began in 1899. The supply of adequate water for years to come was being planned and commenced by the city and its great engineer, William Mulholland, who by his aqueduct, realized the potential of Owens River 250 miles away. This was the greatest engineering feat of Americans to that day. There was also arising an inspiring movement for political reform in Los Angeles, which was setting precedents for other cities to copy. Hollywood's glamour was about to appear. None of these economic and cultural potentials and the possibility of a full cure from tuberculosis were wasted on the tall, slender man who had already begun to wear his lifelong trademarks, a bow tie and a wing collar.

Immediately at home in southern California, Whitsett at first planned to settle near the ocean. He liked the coast's lower altitude, but fearing too cold breezes and fog, he decided to develop land inland from Santa Monica, near Huntington Park. Illness had completely changed Whitsett's way of life, as it had so many pioneer Angelenos' goals. Now he had been transformed into a land developer. Wisely, he chose a walnut tract, which he named Walnut Lawn, and invested $30,000 in it. He believed that settlers were moving southward from Los Angeles, and for a time this was true. He divided his forty acres into 198 lots with 50-foot frontages and 135-foot depths. His years as a health seeker in the dry Southwest had taught Whitsett that water was the most indispensable ingredient, as Angelenos voting bonds to bring Owens Valley water southward keenly knew. Therefore he irrigated Walnut Lawn. Buyers paid ten percent down. He also sold them houses cheaply, thus profitably dispensing with them all. It was most impressive salesmanship, especially because, as Whitsett's personal boomlet was developing, the nation—and California—were suffering from the Panic of 1907.

Not yet free of illness, Whitsett went to Arizona. He bought there a mine at Hassayampa, and had an adventure rescuing a kidnapped girl at Castle Hot Springs near Wickenburg.

Most successful was Whitsett's medical pilgrimage to the little desert town of Acton, California, some twenty miles north of Los Angeles. He built a house there where he finally recovered from symptoms of tuberculosis. Although he would always remain slender, he had recovered strength and energy enough to change Los Angeles' history. Later he revealed that he had told God that if he survived he would use his strength to help the growth of southern California. His desert life also strengthened his interest in developing irrigation in his chosen land.[8]

The San Fernando Valley, where W.P. Whitsett would craft his greatest claims to fame was the site of the San Fernando Mission, founded in 1797 by California's Franciscan padres near one of the few good local water sources. In the Mexican Era of California the mission's Indian converts developed extensive farming and grazing on unusually fertile fields. At Cahuenga Pass, at the valley's southern end, Mexican *Californios* had surrendered to American forces under John C. Frémont in 1847, ending California's role in the Mexican War. The valley developed as a cattle-raising area while northern California had its gold rush. After a severe cattle-killing drought in the early 1860s, it turned to wheat. Now as the twentieth century began and new economic patterns became possible, interest in the region increased. By then water resources were about to be increased via Owens Valley. Los Angeles' rapid transit system of the day, trolley cars, would provide transportation for a growing Los Angeles whose citizens could be fed from valley acres, or could live in the San Fernando Valley and commute daily to a

city job. The Los Angeles Suburban Homes Company was established by a small group of leading merchants and developers, including Harrison Gray Otis and his son-in-law, Harry Chandler, both of the Los Angeles *Times,* M.H. Sherman, a suburban builder, and H.J. Whitley, who had key experience in building pre-movie Hollywood. Like most Angelenos who had bragged for twenty years of their city's future, these men had faith in both the region and themselves. In 1909, Chandler took options to buy from the Los Angeles Farming and Milling Company 47,000 acres of the large former wheat ranch of the two Isaacs, Messrs. Van Nuys and Lankershim. The purchase price was $2,500,000. In 1911, William Whitsett joined them, buying an undivided half-interest in the townsite of Van Nuys. He became its sales manager. Chandler suggested that he name the new town Van Nuys, and Whitsett readily agreed.[9]

Enthusiastically, Whitsett, now 35, called his new lands among the richest and best in California, but to the inexperienced eye those acres looked like a wasteland. There were no nearby roads, light fixtures,

water pipes, gas, or telephone facilities. Train service appeared but twice a week. Yet, Whitsett's advantage was to act now while others "were waiting for conditions to improve."[10]

For months Whitsett planned the formal founding of Van Nuys to occur on Washington's Birthday, February 22, 1911, and the selling of its first lands. There would be a mammoth barbecue that day, with Señor José Romero serving the food with good old legendary Mexican California hospitality, tradition, and cuisine.[11] At first they nearly ran out of food, but commandeered extra supplies. Whitsett chose his own home's location on what became Van Nuys Boulevard. There was also that day a barbecue for orphan children, and later John Steven McGroarty, long a friend of Whitsett and himself the popular "Poet of the Green Verdugo Hills," made the formal address at the opening festivities. Methodists laid the cornerstone of their future church.[12]

The Los Angeles *Times* recorded the event in next day's paper:

> Between dawn and dark, in the shadow of the encircling San Fernando hills and upon a bed that was the rough, plank platform of a strident auctioneer, a city was born yesterday. Cut out of the heart of land that for long generations has been part of a single great property, stretching in every direction beyond the compass of the eye's sweep, the natal day of Van Nuys, the first town to be created on the great Van Nuys and Lankershim tract, was spectacular—wonderful. Nothing like it was ever seen in California. Fifteen miles from the city's (Los Angeles) center, as the crow flies, its setting is the largest tract of undeveloped land near a great city in the world.[13]

It was the sixth community founded in San Fernando Valley.

Van Nuys is born. Note the special railroad cars of the S.P. bringing prospective buyers. A barbecue nearby commemorated the event.

The crowd which the *Times* described required two special trains, one with a dozen and the other seven coaches. At least two thousand people attended. Three days before February 22, Whitsett advertised to accept options at $25 each on town lots, agreeing to sell to the option holders at a price to be established by the bidding. A great multitude had stormed the Southern Pacific depot in downtown Los Angeles to get to

Several thousand people were present at the town's beginning and $200,000 worth of land was sold. The bulletin board on the left depicts plot map.

Van Nuys, while roads into the valley were covered with cars for miles—the automobile that later would help develop—and pollute and clog the "Southland." Initial sales totaled $125,935.75, representing actual cash payments of $39,606.37.[14]

Whitsett soon employed novel methods to increase sales. He had printed tickets entitling one to an auto trip free to Van Nuys. He admonished, "We can only accommodate fifty people daily in our autos, would suggest that you call early and arrange advance date when it will be convenient for you to go with us." Auto caravans left Hill Street at 9 A.M. and 2 P.M. daily except Sunday.[15] He also distributed tags offering free transportation which were put on visitors' luggage in Los Angeles hotels.

In 1917, Whitsett reminisced about the quality and achievements of Van Nuys' pioneer settlers. They were:

> people who have won their successes and made their money in the Middle West and East and have come out here on account of our splendid climate and outdoor advantages...Five acres is the size of ranch which we have found to be the most profitable, as the owners usually plant these tracts out to fruit or English walnuts—have an acre or two of alfalfa between the trees—keep a cow and enough chickens to pay the grocery bill and gasoline for a small car. We have the finest of schools, good churches and many desirable social advantages.

Then he told of his lifelong hobbies, hunting and fishing, and how one could easily reach ideal spots to engage in them. Already Angelenos pulled trailers behind their cars which could be driven off the road for "all the advantages of bathing and fishing, without being tied to any particular locality—In six hours drive, we can strike the mountain streams with excellent trout fishing and deer hunting which cannot be excelled anywhere."[16]

In the early days, 1911-1912, several writers commented on the interesting developments and growth of Whitsett's Van Nuys. Warren McIntire, calling San Fernando the "Valley of Opportunity," described Van Nuys as "the story of how big men have done things in a big way

This 1911 photograph shows an auction sale in still sparsely settled Van Nuys. Already several cars are in evidence in this Los Angeles suburb.

and builded up a rich section from an almost unvisited and little known wheat acreage."[17] In December, 1911, he found that:

> The town of Van Nuys bustles. Business of all kinds flourishes in high-grade buildings. All around are country estate mansions builded the past summer by bankers and wealthy men of Los Angeles. And around these are the little farms of from five to twenty acres with sugar-beets, potatoes, vegetables and fruits.

"Within the first eight months, land sales had reached $4,500,000." He explained, specifying, "A boulevard 130 feet wide was built fifteen miles through the valley at a cost of $500,000 and double-parked with roses and semi-tropical trees on both sides."[18] In March, 1912, John J. Wall in *West Coast Magazine* said that the new community's growth "cannot fail to be of interest to magazine readers everywhere."[19] Events moved with astonishing speed. Van Nuys boasted a post office by August 18, 1911; its first journal, the *News,* appeared on August 24, and on December 4, a $50,000 bond issue was carried in the less than year-old town for schools; eighty votes favored it against minimal opposition. The Pacific Electric's streetcar tracks reached Van Nuys on December 18. As one might have expected in a town founded by W.P. Whitsett, the Chamber of Commerce was founded on April 20, 1912, and electric lights gleamed on July 20, followed on August 3, 1912 by the first Harvest Festival, boosted by the founding father.

With these substantial gains, Whitsett increased his publicity campaign. If all the people he contacted did not become buyers, most of them at least became boosters, insisted Wall. One of Whitsett's novel strategems became apparent on September 9, 1912, when the Grand Army of the Republic encampment met in Los Angeles. Civil War veterans of the Union were still very active politically and were economically significant. On their arrival they received round trip tickets to Van Nuys. Altogether, twelve thousand tickets were distributed. Automobiles and sightseeing busses took them there on a twice-a-day schedule. As a result, September sales surprisingly soared to the $50,000 mark—and during what was usually an off-season. One might have expected,

without Whitsett's persuasive talent, that rural visits would have been poor during such a national convention.[20]

Reminiscing in 1932 at Van Nuys' "coming of age" at twenty-one, its founder offered an insight:

> Many years ago I originated the slogan "The Town That was Started Right," and have endeavored to have it lived up to always. Having been brought into existence, the care and nourishment of the self-supporting stage fell to me. Continuing the comparison with a child, we may say that in its early years the infant city, precocious and lusty as it was, required eternally vigilant care. It required nursing, a proper financial and development diet, including the feeding of productive industries fast enough to create naturally, healthy growth but not so fast as to induce community indigestion. As all infants do, it had to be literally supported during its early years and until it could begin to toddle and then walk. Practically every industry had to be subsidized, educational facilities had to be provided, adequate transportation and a dependable water supply had to be secured and opportunities to work provided for the growing population.

Whitsett was proud of his part in:

> establishing the symmetrical platting of the townsite so that its arterial life was fed to the common Boulevard center, in the planting of miles and miles of trees that now make our streets delightful; in the comprehensive zoning restrictions (the first of its kind to be established on such a large scale in the State) which provide for orderly and protected expansion and improvement of homes, businesses, and industries.[21]

Because of restrictions against the manufacture, sale, and distribution of intoxicating liquor, Van Nuys, like many other southern California towns of the period, became "dry" some years before the Eighteenth Amendment of 1919.

Blessed with a seemingly endless supply of ideas for improving his community, it is no surprise that W.P. Whitsett was dubbed by one California historian "San Fernando Valley's Godfather." Agricultural advancement especially attracted him. Whitsett knew of Petaluma, California's center of poultry and eggs production north of San Francisco. He believed that its climate and soils were similar to Van Nuys's and concluded that "The attraction about raising poultry is that you don't have to wait for your crop. Instead of taking three or four years in the case of fruit, your money from the chicken ranch comes in every day." Accordingly, he took several Van Nuys ranchers to Petaluma and convinced them what profits were possible. Whitsett had an architect develop an ideal chicken house based on the most successful ones at Petaluma. They would leave sufficient room on a modest plot to raise barley. He also introduced incubators to Van Nuys. Whitsett believed that "with chickens there is something for every member of the family

to do." This indeed was agricultural togetherness such as early Americans had known.[22]

Rival of Petaluma, California's poultry "capital" Van Nuys soon was selling farms for chicken and egg production.

A successful Van Nuys poultry "ranch" of the early days.

In less than a decade from its founding Van Nuys had a "million dollar potato industry" and a "million dollar dairy industry." It was called "the milk bottle of Los Angeles." Whitsett had encouraged Swiss dairy farmers to settle there. He was called as well the first man to use a cover crop in the area, to show Van Nuys farmers that it would grow potatoes. His two young sons grew White Rose potatoes, sold them on

the roadside, and won first prize for them at the State Fair in Sacramento. Whitsett, always planning ahead, had gotten experts from Colorado to prove that Van Nuys was ideal for the crop.

During the years just after 1911, before Owens Valley water arrived in San Fernando Valley, Van Nuys had to dig wells. An organ factory was established there too, in order to inaugurate industry in the largely rural area, but its successes were few. Although Whitsett had failed for once, at least he had given jobs to high-priced mechanics who resided there. He succeeded in getting the powerful Southern Pacific, until that time considered the "Octopus" of California economics and politics, to reduce its rail rate to Van Nuys.[23] He made up the difference between what he wanted for tourists and the price the SP would give.[24]

To help finance this California cornucopia which was beginning to feed an emerging Los Angeles metropolis, Whitsett became a banker! He established the Bank of Van Nuys in 1922 and the Provident Building and Loan Association in 1925. He called the former "thoroughly a Van Nuys community organization." Its stock was widely owned within Van Nuys.[25] In 1926, the bank, which then had $1,250,000 in resources, merged with the Security-First National Bank of Los Angeles. His building and loan association, of which he was first president, was called during the Depression one of the soundest in California. It catered to small farm loans.[26]

Agricultural progress at Van Nuys. Farm labor represented a multi-ethnic work force.

Van Nuys was only ten months old when this scene of prospective residents was taken. A Pacific Electric special tourist trolley has just brought several.

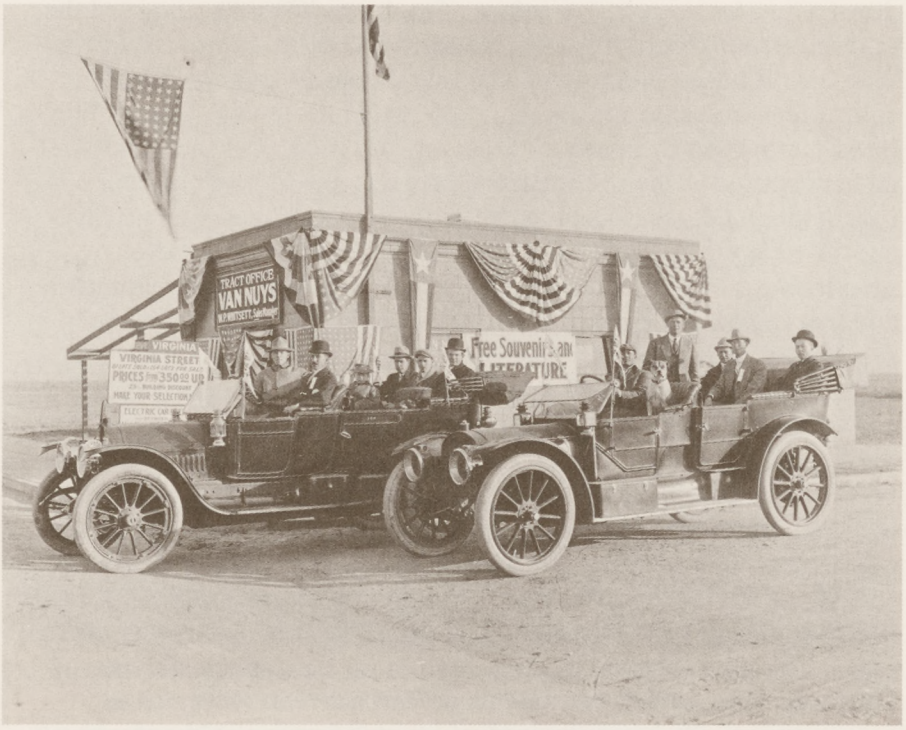
Whitsett's persistent dream for one-acre farm homes in the San Fernando Valley sheds much light on his philosophy of a strong backboned individualism, earned self-respect, and healthy optimism that he believed were at the center of Americanism. He admitted readily that this was no original idea of his. Thomas Jefferson's belief in the blessings of a wholesome and moral rural life as opposed to too great urbanization had inspired many. Whitsett began advertising it prior to 1926. By the 1930s millions of Americans argued that overindustrialization and speculation had brought on the nation's great challenge, depression.

Whitsett's friend, McGroarty, explained that personally this agricultural entrepreneur had adopted the ideal from his grandfather, Ralph Whitsett, who instilled a love of rural life and reverence for farming as basic to all of man's endeavors. The elder Whitsett had encouraged his coal mine employees in bad times to turn to the land for their living. As we have seen, the grandson's bank and loan company encouraged investing in small plots.[27] During the Depression, Henry Ford, Sr. agreed with Whitsett's 'back to the farm'' movement, saying, ''The farm and the factory are natural allies. One is incomplete without the other. They never should separate.''[28]

In 1932, Whitsett presented the Garden Acre Homes plan to build three hundred houses in three years. Soon he had constructed and sold thirty houses on his own account to responsible purchasers who put

down a quarter in cash.[29] A coiner of mottoes, Whitsett advanced the phrase "Better Homes for Less Money on 'Garden Acres.'"[30] For a long time Whitsett had studied town development and compared and contrasted American and foreign projects. In his several visits to Europe he was impressed by homes of peasants who worked in towns or cities and commuted to their residences where they could produce their own food and sell a little at local markets. In Germany he was especially impressed in the 1920s at what he saw.[31] As he put it in a radio broadcast, "I went to Germany, France, Belgium and other countries and saw their small, neat farms, carefully cared for and wonderfully productive. In France, for instance, I saw...places where the people living in communities went daily back and forth to the farms they cultivated. They seemed very happy."[32] He advocated for Van Nuys lots as small as 100 by 300 feet, large enough for truck gardens in his "Valley of Content."[33] His friend, McGroarty, meanwhile echoed the ethics of this theme, saying that culture perishes if it leaves the soil for cities. Keeping to his plan, Whitsett wrote for the Los Angeles *Times* that Depression-ridden Americans would never know security until their food was certain and produced away from ever more congested metropoli.[34] This also reflected his deep faith in the dependable richness of California soils, a faith that had made him and Van Nuys rich in previous years. Correctly he predicted that industry would come to southern California in ever greater force and that rapid transit would accelerate the trend. Whitsett saw, too, that workdays would soon be shortened, giving local workers more time for growing things. Here was the ideal region and the time for his suburban garden-farms with their "food, health, a home, security, and independence." To Whitsett, words always meant action. He formed groups of five families to carry out the crusade under his Whitsett Group Plan. He reasoned that members of these families could form, as we say today, "car pools" to go downtown from their neighboring homes to a common workplace, return together as cheaply as one rider could, and en route discuss the problems and methods of farming and the workplace.[35] Whitsett was concerned that land prices were falling during the Depression and believed his plan would stop the turning of the valley into an area of shacks.

Although numerous farm-homes appeared in the 1930s, the next decade of war, followed by unprecedented booms, saw the San Fernando Valley become more and more urban and the slow disappearance of agriculture. Subdivisions grew and by the 1960s high rises and condominiums presaged the high cost of now urbanized valley lands. Today, the San Fernando area is a densely populated region, no longer so dependent on downtown Los Angeles. Whitsett's great success in "selling" and enriching Van Nuys had ironically become too successful



Whitsett's real estate tract office during the "selling of Van Nuys." These persons are sales personnel.

for his grand rural design. Some futurists, however, prophesying for the postindustrial age of software, see engineers and others moving to small towns—indeed farm-garden-homes, and yet being at the center of the computer age which will need no metropoli. Perhaps "W.P." predicted better than he knew!

Although San Fernando Valley was for over half a century the most important area of Whitsett's fertile dreams, he had had a long association and romance with another valley 250 miles to the northeast. This was Owens Valley, from the 1860s to the 1910s a quiet, rustic region of boom and bust mining and later well-watered pastures white with sheep and brown with cattle and orchards. Early Owens Valleyites had known occasional earthquakes and colorful Indian rites, but little change until the twentieth century dawned. As a lifelong devotee of hunting and fishing young Paul Whitsett had often visited the area on vacation and marveled at its scenic beauty in lakes, snowy sierras, and small valley towns. Others before him had noted its river, flowing southeastward from the sierra, for the Owens had the potential of watering a city far away and turning the arid San Fernando Valley into a garden spot. Angeleno leaders such as William Mulholland, experienced engineer and hydrographer of the Los Angeles Water Company, believed this could be realized in five years and with $24 million dollars. He predicted

accurately and built the aqueduct, 1908-1913, which turned the northern valley into a desert and roused the anger and occasionally the violence of Owens Valley residents who saw their agriculture wither.

By the mid- and late-1920s, Owensites had dynamited the Los Angeles Aqueduct several times. This saddened Whitsett, who knew the value of water. He wanted a rehabilitation of the dying valley and peace and prosperity for the contestants. His proposition was ahead of his time. Apparently W.P. Whitsett never took a vacation abroad merely to relax. He had been to Switzerland and noted how much it reminded him of the High Sierra and the Owens Valley to its east. He favored a new national park known as Roosevelt-Sequoia, which would have reached from Little Lake to beyond Tioga Pass and up to Walker River—an area two-thirds the size of Switzerland. Yet, he saw, there were only five small towns in the vicinity, while in the same sized area of Switzerland there flourished 189 towns with three million people. Owens Valley had only 4,000 inhabitants. As was his way, Whitsett studied this challenge. There were 145 peaks in his area of eastern California above 11,000 feet, while Switzerland had but 115. The impoverished Owens Valley people, blaming Los Angeles for their predicament, could prosper if 50,000 people formed a club agreeing to spend their vacations in the High Sierra, which he called "the most delightful summer outing section in America and it should be an all-year outing park." He strove successfully for an improved highway from Mojave to Owens Valley (now U.S. 395).[36] By 1927 the route had been improved by the state from Mojave to Bishop. Now, he enthused, it was "a comfortable day's journey by auto into Owens Valley. Last year we estimate we made good in our effort to put fifty thousand additional outdoor pleasure seekers in Owens Valley; this was accomplished by means of circulars sent to all water consumers in Los Angeles."[37] He even contemplated regular airplane flights from Los Angeles to get tourists to a modern hotel in two hours! This indeed could be the "greatest recreational region, potentially, in the world." One, of course, would have to adopt the excellent methods of pleasing tourists that the experienced Swiss had perfected and he had studied.[38]

By 1929, Whitsett's dream had expanded and crystallized. He wanted Los Angeles to annex and develop Owens Valley. He envisioned a series of concessions granted to Angeleno entrepreneurs who could develop hotels, resorts for skiing, bobsledding, hiking, fishing, and hunting. These would make profits for Angelenos and give many good jobs to Owensites, keeping the discouraged from leaving the area. This would work if Angelenos were not timid but would boldly take on this new challenge as an adjunct to the aqueduct that they had long and nobly supported.[39]

On April 6, 1929, at the small Owens Valley town of Big Pine,

Evidence of new construction in Whitsett's booming Van Nuys.

Whitsett spoke simply but eloquently, seeking Valley support:

> The time has arrived to consider annexation of these mountain valleys to the City of Los Angeles, as the best and only possible means to successful progress in the future. Our legislature is in session. The necessary enabling act is before it. All that Senator Carter's bill undertakes is to make possible for you to join the City; it does not in the least bind you to do so...Los Angeles cannot live her destiny without a continuing increase in her tourist and outing attractions and the Eastern Sierra sources of water supply. Neither can this region attain maximum development without the physical, financial, and sentimental support of the City...The future of the Owens Valley and Eastern Sierra generally is greater than our dreams. I picture an American Switzerland, capitalizing attractions of nature far surpassing the offering of Alpine Europe. I envision a fertile mountain valley colorful with the camps and playgrounds of a two million population, musical with the hum of productive food supply industry, its still virginal waters teeming with trout and its hillslopes swarming with artificially increased native and introduced alien game, attracting sport seekers from all over the world...a community largely self-supporting but never self-sufficient.

In conclusion Whitsett pictured impoverished ranchers who had left Owens Valley after the aqueduct was completed and asserted that that would be impossible within the corporate limits of Los Angeles. The two areas would prosper together.[40] The incorporation never occurred, but Owens Valley and its surrounding mountains continue increasingly to attract tourists at all seasons, even from abroad.

Through his practical experiences as a self-made expert on water, W.P. Whitsett was appointed as a commissioner of the board of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power in 1924. In his new post

he argued for limiting the admission of new communities to the city's water, for by the mid-twenties it was obvious that the city would need even more water. His five years in this important position made him the ideal man to be appointed chairman of the newly-formed Metropolitan Water District of Southern California.

It was obvious that Los Angeles, which as a city would pass the million population mark by 1930, would have to look eastward to the Colorado River. Since that stream and its tributaries were shared by seven Southwestern states, the federal government was to be involved. In 1928, the United States' Johnson-Swing Act, of which Whitsett had been a key proponent, signalled construction, and the several independent cities of southern California, including Los Angeles, formed the Metropolitan Water District, to get abundant water and power. Whitsett saw that highly competent men would be appointed by the Board, particularly Frank E. Weymouth, general manager and chief engineer of the Colorado River Project, whom Whitsett described as an indispensable man for the vital work ahead. As Chairman of the Board, Whitsett spearheaded passage of the $220 million bond issue in 1931, in the depths of the great recession. This made possible the construction of Hoover Dam on the Colorado.[41] Whitsett was always under political

Water for Van Nuys! During his California years W.P. Whitsett appreciated its vital roles and helped supply water to the thirsty area.

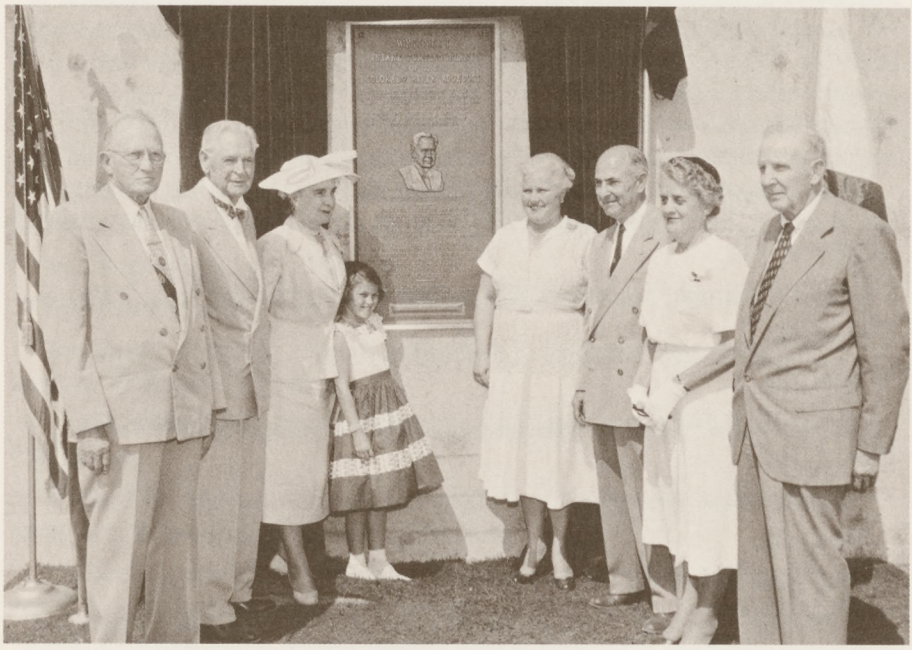
pressure as chairman from vendors, contractors, and others seeking influence. He also struggled and succeeded in getting a *large* dam. Unknown then, its vital role later would be seen after Pearl Harbor as America entered World War II and southern California greatly expanded as a war industries base. Whitsett learned to use the radio effectively to make many speeches, as earlier he had used the press. This time he sold Californians on the importance of the project. There were many grousers, some in high positions, who believed that the project was too difficult to complete, too expensive, and that Los Angeles would never grow large enough to need its expansive and costly facilities. He even had to argue with President Franklin D. Roosevelt in advocating the uses of aluminum. History vindicated Whitsett. He believed that "Divine Providence opened the eyes and the minds and the souls of our people to the true vision of a great and growing future of this country."[42] No wonder Whitsett was named "Los Angeles' Most Useful Citizen" in 1938.[43] He retired from his history-making post on January 10, 1947, after eight unanimous reelections to the post. Although the founder of Van Nuys lived quietly and without pomposity, he was generous in his charities. He gave plots of land to various Van Nuys churches and to the San Fernando Valley Boy Scouts, and was honorary president of the group. A building he donated let them use the moneys for their scouting purposes. His largess let them acquire Camp Whitsett in the Sequoia National Park vicinity. He also had an engineer friend of his, Guy F. Atkinson, build a dam there, thus creating a lake so city boys could learn to swim in its quiet waters. They named it Lake Ida for his second wife. He contributed $50,000 and land to the Valley Presbyterian Hospital.

Whitsett also helped support the annual Mission Play near the famous Franciscan mission in San Gabriel, which his poet friend, John Steven McGroarty, had written and produced. It told dramatically of Father Junipero Serra's initial days in Spanish California, his problems, faith, and achievements. Whitsett thought it would be more appropriate at San Fernando Mission, but was overruled. In the Depression it became a financial failure and closed.

On September 26, 1934, after more than a third of a century of marriage, his wife, Sarah, died in Los Angeles at 62. At every Christmastime for years in Van Nuys she had played hostess to thousands of the community's children. Her husband, three children and several grandchildren survived her.[44]

The grieving Whitsett did not intend to remarry unless he could find a lady as interested in community events and civic improvements as he. He did. She was a widow, Ida Floyd. Whitsett was vacationing in Florida and attended a flower show where she spoke. Ida had always been interested in outside interests and had joined many civic-oriented

groups. They were married in May of 1935. They would be married for almost thirty years until his death.[45]



W.P. Whitsett and his wife, Ida, 2nd and 3rd from left, at the dedication of the Whitsett Intake Pumping Plant of the Metropolitan Water District.

W.P. Whitsett was a member of the Christian Church, a Republican, and a Mason. He was also active in the Los Angeles Athletic Club and the Hollywood Country Club.[46] His life underlined emphatically his philosophy. One December day at his church's men's class he spoke briefly of his credo. He showed that religion should always be a key factor in one's business, and he who had overcome so many health problems said, "Fear creates that which it fears. Faith may build its vision into reality."[47] He also observed in 1944, "When the Good Lord created this earth of ours He provided a job for every man, woman, and child in it—for He intended man, made in His image, to be a co-creator with Him."[48]

After 89 years of a full life he died on April 8, 1965. His funeral was held in the Little Church of the Flowers at Forest Lawn, Glendale.[49] He had seen Van Nuys grow from 250 people in 1911, to 18,000 during the Depression of the 1930s, to 57,000 in 1950.[50] By 1965 the Valley had passed the million mark, having about five times as many people as our largest state, Alaska. A prominent avenue in that valley had been named for him. Few human beings have such monuments. He had made converts to his opinions, backboned by strong convictions and visions. His great adventure set many patterns for the present and future development of southern California.

NOTES

For a full-length biography of Whitsett see: Merle Armitage, *Success Is No Accident* (Manzanita Press, 1959). Armitage extensively interviewed both Mr. Whitsett in the late 1950's and his second wife, Ida. The present writer wants to thank Dr. James L. Dodson, curator of the History Museum at Los Angeles Valley College, for his kindness and help in permitting use of the Whitsett papers there in September 1987.

[1]John Steven McGroarty, *California of the South* (5 vols., Chicago, Los Angeles, and Indianapolis; S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, Inc., 1933), IV, 731.

[2]Merle Armitage, *Success Is No Accident* (Manzanita Press, 1959), 2.

[3]*Ibid.,* 17.

[4]*Ibid.,* 26.

[5]"Mrs. W.P. Whitsett Dies," Los Angeles *Times,* September 27, 1934, II, p. 1.

[6]Armitage, *op. cit.,* 48.

[7]*Ibid.,* 79.

[8]*Ibid.,* 107.

[9]*Ibid.,* 109. See also Whitsett Papers, file WHT-CRI, (hereafter cited as Whitsett Collection) at Los Angeles Valley College, WPW to James R. Page, July 3, 1944.

[10]McGroarty, *California,* 733.

[11]"The Van Nuys Story," *Valley Times Today,* February 22, 1961, pp. 11-12. See also Frank M. Keffer, *History of San Fernando Valley* (Glendale: Stillman Printing Company, 1934, 83. Apparently barbecues were frequently given, Spanish-style.

[12]On Van Nuys founding, Whitsett Correspondence, to Whitsett by unknown author, February 9, 1911.

[13]"City Is Born," Los Angeles *Times,* Part II, February 23, 1911, p. 1.

[14]John J. Wall, "Making a California Town," *West Coast Magazine* (Los Angeles), XIII, November, 1912, pp. 220-22.

[15]Form letter of W.P. Whitsett, 1912 in Whitsett Collection, Los Angeles Valley College.

[16]W.P. Whitsett to E.W. Johnson, February 24, 1917, file WHT-CRI.

[17]Warren McIntire, "The Valley of Opportunity: Wonderful Development of Van Nuys-Lankershim Lands on the Outskirts of Los Angeles," *Sunset* (Los Angeles), XXVI, #6, December, 1911, p. 713.

[18]*Ibid.,* 714.

[19]John J. Wall, *op. cit.,* 220.

[20]*Ibid.,* 221.

[21]William P. Whitsett, "Van Nuys is 21 Years Old Today," (February 22, 1932) typescript in Whitsett Collection.

[22]"Poultry Rival to Petaluma," Los Angeles *Herald,* March 21, 1914, n.p. See also N.L. Chapin, "A Community of Million-Dollar Crops," *California Farmer* (Los Angeles), May 1, 1921, p. 5 and p. 21.

[23]Armitage, *op. cit.,* 118.

[24]*Ibid.,* 151.

[25]Letter of WPW, November 10, 1921, WHT-CRI, Whitsett Collection.

[26]McGroarty, *op. cit.,* 734.

[27]McGroarty, *ibid.,* 734.

[28]Ida Floyd Whitsett, "Back to the Soil." undated typescript of speech, Whitsett Collection.

[29]Letter of WPW to Harry Chandler, January 5, 1935, Whitsett Collection.

[30]William P. Whitsett "Back to Land Plea" typescript of WPW's radio script, no date, Whitsett Collection.

[31]"More Than a Man" editorial, San Fernando Valley *Valley Times,* April 13, 1965, p. 4. See also John Steven McGroarty, "Seen from the Green Verdugo Hills," Los Angeles *Times* Magazine Section, November 29, 1931, p. 4.

[32]"Back to Land Plea" *op. cit.,*

[33]Mark de Villers, "The Van Nuys Story," San Fernando Valley *Valley Times,* February 22, 1961, p. 12. "Van Nuys Fetes Twenty-third Birthday," Los Angeles *Times,* II, February 23, 1934, p. 1.

[34]William P. Whitsett, "The Right Way Out," Los Angeles *Times,* Farm and Garden Magazine, November 29, 1931, p. 3.

[35]"Comprehensive Group Plan of Home Ownership Urged by Founder of Van Nuys," December 10, 1931, n.p. See also WPW to Harry Chandler, January 7, 1935, WHT-14, Whitsett Collection, and "Van Nuys to Hold Farm Home Week," Los Angeles *Times,* June 17, 1933, II, p. 6.

[36]WPW to George P. Clements, October, 1924, WHT-CR2, Whitsett Collection. See also "Beauties of Southland Excel," Van Nuys *News,* October 4, 1927, p. 1.

[37]WPW to Harry Chandler, January 17, 1927, WHT-CR2, Whitsett Collection.

[38]Developing of Sierras Area Urged," Los Angeles *Times,* October 8, 1927, II, 5.

[39]Armitage, *op. cit.,* 168.

[40]*Ibid.,* 301.

[41]"W.P. Whitsett, First M.W.D. Chairman Dies," *Aqueduct News* (Los Angeles) XXXII, #4, April, 1965, pp. 1 and 4. See also transcript of "Talk by W.P. Whitsett at Weymouth Memorial Ceremony, March 18, 1953, WHT-14, Whitsett Collection. This was the longest and largest domestic water supply in the United States.

[42]Armitage, *op. cit.,* 178. See also WPW typescript, March 1953, WHT 14, Whitsett Collection. From 1938 to 1947, Whitsett was a member of the Colorado River Board of California, *Aqueduct News,* XIV, #6, June, 1947, p. 2.

[43]*Aqueduct News,* April, 1965, *op. cit.,* p. 4.

[44]"Mrs. W.P. Whitsett Dies," Los Angeles *Times,* September 27, 1934, II, p. 1.

[45]"Whitsett Returns Home With His Florida Bride," Los Angeles *Times,* Part II, p. 1, June 11, 1935.

[46]McGroarty, *California of the South,* op. cit., 735-736.

[47]Typescript of talk of WPW before Central Christian Church of Van Nuys, Men's Class, December 5, 1926, Whitsett Collection.

[48]Mimeograph copy of William P. Whitsett, "Production of Food Is Indispensable Occupation of Man," which was published in the Van Nuys *Valley News,* October 16, 1944, n.p. WHT-14, Whitsett Collection. Also consult mimeograph of W.P. Whitsett's remarks as Chairman of the Board of Directors of the M.W.D. of Southern California at All-Year Club of Southern California, December 11, 1939. He tells how he had gone with a Los Angeles merchant group to Honolulu to stimulate trade of Hawaii with Los Angeles, and how on return the ship sank and 300 voyagers had to be rescued. Rival San Franciscans gloated that Angelenos had to return to San Francisco Bay, but at the last moment Whitsett managed to get the ship's home port, Los Angeles, to welcome them, taking the satisfaction from San Francisco! See page 6.

[49]Interesting obituaries are: "W.P. Whitsett, Founder of Van Nuys, Dies," Los Angeles *Times,* April 9, 1965, II, p. 30, and "William Paul Whitsett, Founder of Van Nuys, Dies," Los Angeles *Herald-Examiner,* April 9, 1965, C3.

[50]WPW letter to O.R. Angelillo, August 12, 1933, Whitsett Collection. Worth noting is carbon copy of WPW's remarks on radio station KGIL, October 19, 1947, also Whitsett Collection, WHT-14, and WPW "The Future of Southern California in Light of Observations of Eastern Metropolitan Cities," June 30, 1939, WHT-14, Whitsett Collection. He foresaw Valley urban problems such as the need for parks, parking places, traffic jams, slums, and sanitation maintenance.